

THE GRANTS PASS STORY

Like many communities, especially smaller ones in the Pacific Northwest, Grants Pass (pop. 25,000) had an economic history tied to natural resources. In the beginning (mid/late 1800s) the economic base was tied to mining. That soon evolved into many decades of reliance on the wood products industry - no big surprise, given the close proximity to seemingly endless stands of billions of board-feet of high-quality Douglas fir. Logging, sawmills, plywood mills and other wood-product-related industries were the mainstay of the local economy from the early 1900s through the 1980s. Then things changed. And fortunately for Grants Pass, the community for the most part embraced the change.

The changes that ultimately led to local impacts included such dynamic forces as foreign trade policy, endangered species laws, economic globalization, national market forces, interest rates and federal budget restructuring. These represent a very daunting list of forces that no community can hope to influence.

One need not look too far around this region to see many communities faced with the same dilemma - whether it be a transition from an economy based on fishing, mining, timber or agriculture, the story is essentially the same - sooner or later, it's "diversify or die." Grants Pass/Josephine County made the conscious choice to diversify.



Today in the Grants Pass area, no one industry dominates and no one business dominates. In fact, Josephine County is the most economically diverse non-metro county in Oregon, based on distribution of payroll employment by industry type. While some other communities are still trying to figure out what comes next after natural resources, Grants Pass has moved way past that and is instead looking at ways to embrace emerging technology and how to induce new industry to relocate from other, higher-cost areas.

Today, a 100+ acre former sawmill is being converted into a light industrial park after the community's last sawmill closed its doors in 1999. Now, a diverse mix of employers, such as electronics, machining and ceramics make up a growing employment base at the still-developing privately-owned park that is home to more jobs today than when the sawmill was operating - and the park is less than half developed.

The City is working with the local community college to develop a technical park concept that could ultimately revolve around a renewable energy technology cluster. Virtually all "tech parks" across the

country are centered on major research universities, but that isn't stopping us from doing something very unique. A Business Retention & Expansion (BR&E) program, jointly administered by the City and the local Chamber of Commerce, has won awards from the Governor and from an international trade organization for its efforts and innovations. A community-based team surveys key employers on a regular basis to determine strategies to enable existing firms to expand and add new jobs.

An emerging arts movement has taken the community by storm. Led predominately in the private sector by a local bank and its visionary president, local artists (once starving and unknown) are now household names and in great demand, thanks to the variety of regular highly-visible public art projects the bank sponsors and coordinates throughout the year. The City has branded itself as a center for high-quality experiences, and it is paying off. No longer regarded as a "discount town," Grants Pass attracts much wealth, largely from California (Grants Pass is less than an hour north of the California border on Interstate 5) from tourists, retirees and new business relocations.

Grants Pass has taken advantage of its key location on I-5, as the primary north-south surface artery in the West and its proximity to what is often regarded as the fifth largest economy in the world – The Golden State. But it's still a small town located in a nature-lover's paradise, with one of Congress' original six National Wild & Scenic Rivers running right through the heart of town, the Rogue River. Grants Pass is also adjacent to two National Forests and one of the largest wilderness areas in the West, the Kalmiopsis, where rare and unique botanical wonders are abound. Just down the road are the Oregon Caves National Monument, and it's just a short

drive to Crater Lake National Park, the Pacific Ocean and Redwood National Park.

Grants Pass boasts a new community hospital, a new high school campus that looks more like a small college, a revitalized downtown with a booming historic district and the state's longest-running outdoor growers' & crafters markets, and an award-winning pedestrian bridge crossing the Rogue River, linking an expansive community-built sports park with the Josephine County Fairgrounds.

Adopting a "can-do" attitude, shaping vision, leveraging resources, raising strong leaders, encouraging entrepreneurial approaches, building a brand and embracing the "teeter-totter factor – Grants Pass has done it all and plans to continue. In the lexicon of "Boomtown USA" author, Jack Schultz, we are a true "Golden Eagle Agurb®."

